

STOREFRONT FOR ART AND ARCHITECTURE

MARKING TIME: JOS VULTO AND THE ROOKING (SMOKING) OF BUILDINGS

And the house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau for stubble, and they shall kindle in them, and devour them...

Obadiah.18


Jos Vulto smokes things, he smokes objects, plaster-casts, rooms, buildings and even pieces of paper such as this. Though the art of smoking foodstuffs is not limited to Holland or the Low Countries it is tempting to see Vulto's *modus operandi* as specifically Dutch. He uses the archaic Dutch word 'Rooking' to describe all of his smoking projects and it was as a young Dutch artist living in Holland that he began to smoke fish, a local speciality, followed by a wide variety of materials.

Yet of course nothing could be more universal, less regionally specific, than the action and effect of smoke and there is an almost ancient primitivism to its feverish logic, the primordial spirit of Wagner's 'Magic Fire Music'. Vulto uses the most primeval of tools, fire itself, to produce art works which are both of a specific place and time but also of a larger, anonymous cosmology. Thus there is a contrast throughout Vulto's work between the universality of fire and smoke versus the cultural specificity of his Dutch origins and the individual building locations he has so carefully chosen.

Traditional techniques of smoking may have been developed and refined in Holland but they are used by Vulto around the world more as a way of marking time, literally, than of marking place. In this way Vulto's project is closer to Rachel Whiteread than any other current artist, an ostensible fascination with space that proves, in the long run, to be more about temporality. The gradations in texture, the darkness, extent and depth of the marks made by Vulto's smokings depend on the duration of his fires.

A 'smoking' may last only an hour or it may continue for several weeks, the professional sawdust Vulto often uses can smolder slumbering for months, though the artist is always precisely aware of how to control the elements at his disposal. Vulto's art is made between the unpredictable wildness of flames, wind, temperature and weather and the technical precision of his own thoroughly-researched methods. As an artist Vulto attempts, successfully thank God, to control the primal elements which are his material and tools though never able to determine the precise results. Chance and the vagaries of each situation as much determine the final effect of the 'smoking' as Vulto's own decisions and actions, an art unafraid of hazard's touch.

Vulto's ambition to smoke the interiors of abandoned buildings was slowly tested and developed with scale-models and miniature prototypes before his first full-sized project. The basic work of each 'smoking' remains the same whatever the scale of the building;



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the stockpiling of sawdust or other suitable material, sealing windows, doors and other openings, setting fires to the desired level of combustibility, then maintaining or curtailing them according to the planned duration. Naturally for each building the layout and local detail requires specific technical requirements, erecting scaffolding to reach chimneys or windows, creating a suspended platform for the sawdust, and each small intervention changes the nature of the event.

The material with which Vulto seals the doors, windows and other architectural orifices becomes imprinted with a residual trace of the 'smoking', a very literal print whose tone and texture depends on the length of exposure. These cloths with their smoked outlines are like extremely primitive photograms, the Shroud of Turin or some printing technique developed by prehistoric man. When this shroud is later displayed one can clearly make out the shape of the portal or chimney they blocked and these prints are the most overtly 'artistic' results of the entire smoking-process. But though these smoke-darkened squares and rectangles can clearly be read as art it should not be assumed that they are the sole purpose of Vulto's 'smokings', a self-conscious end result in a unique objet d'art which justifies the whole complex ritual.

Rather the art work is the entire process in itself, finding an appropriate building, suffering the long, bureaucratic complexities of gaining permission, up to and including the choosing and delivery of the sawdust, sealing of exits and setting of fires. It is only in this way (and not in any superficial resemblance between wrapped structures) that Vulto's art resembles that of Christo, in so much as the work is the whole system of setting a public project into action, from paperwork, sponsorship and civic authorization through to the manual labor of assembling then removing debris.

Each 'smoking' is an art event that only exists in the real time of its execution, documented by photography and smoked imprint of cloth wrappings, but never reducible to this documentation, however impressive or creative it may look by itself.

The effect of Vulto's smoked interiors also depends upon what type of structure and location they occupy. The meaning of such an event in an abandoned industrial food-smoking building in Antwerp is very different to its character in a military bunker in Norway or decayed naval fort outside Amsterdam. The micro-history of the building, its purpose and intention as well as its shape is smoked-out into the open and then captured on cloth like a fingerprint of time itself. There is also something inherently physical, if not violent, to this activity, the threat of fire and darkness and heat also suggested by the tight funereal shrouds that smother the building's breathing orifices. Vulto's 'smoking' in Israel made this subtext of aggression overt in the context of the sealing of Palestinian houses, the welding shut of windows and doors, as routine punishment. The evicted families then live in canvas sheet tents, which resemble Vulto's own use of cloth. The Israeli army has sealed 475 houses, completely or in part since 1980, and Vulto's partial sealing and smoking of a freestanding building in the desert could easily have been mistaken for just such a military operation.

There is already a vocabulary of architecture & fire within contemporary art practice, ranging from the burnt surfaces of Jackie Winsor's boxes and Arman's scorched antique furniture to Ed Ruscha's painting of the LA Museum of Modern Art on fire. But whether in the heroic paintings of Anselm Kiefer, Mike Kelley's burnt-out dollhouse or charred scale models of modernist buildings by Sam Durant, the central theme of temporal and

spatial entropy remain constant. The utopian ambitions of our century seem to be deserving of nothing but flames and cinders in revenge for their failed promise. International Modernism's dream of technocratic efficiency seems too close to the streamlined efficiency of the death camps for its ideals to survive untarnished. Vulto's transformation of old buildings into red-hot furnaces of heaped ashes, and then his subsequent transformation of such buildings into photo-documentation and smoke printed shrouds (the only existent records of these structural performances) is no way an attack upon the original integrity of such buildings but rather an alchemical transformation of their base elements into the wider and wilder potentialities of 'art.'

Smoking a building should be considered analogous to smoking fish or any foodstuff, violent perhaps, but no more violent than any other action that the food-chain requires and with the final purpose of producing something more delicious, more sophisticated than the original material would ever have suggested. Smoking fish, with all its rituals and theories, is both part of the world of culture, of extreme artifice, and that of practical, simple food. Likewise Vulto's smoked buildings are entirely innocent whilst utterly refined, part contemporary art discourse, part workmanlike physical simplicity.

Adrian Dannatt
Curator

In 1987 Vulto developed a process that "photographs" buildings using smoke. He shrouds the building in fabric and uses sawdust to smoke the interiors. He has "imprinted" several buildings throughout the world using this process. He terms this 'Rooking', the archaic Dutch word for smoking.

CLOCKWISE STARTING IN THE FAR CORNER

SMOKE SHROUD from a scale model building at the beginning of experiments, 1987. (Smoke on cotton, 3' x 2')

STUDIES

s'Hertogenbosch, Holland 1987

In 1987 Vulto commenced a series of studies using first cardboard boxes and then scale models of buildings, no more than two feet high. He built these models himself out of wood, plaster and even miniature bricks and then smoked them on the roof of his studio.

ROOKING I (1:1)

s'Hertogenbosch, Holland 1987

In an abandoned metallurgical factory Vulto erected scaffolding and a corrugated iron platform to hold the sawdust before covering the openings with cloth. At this time he still thought the fabric needed to be cut in order to allow the smoke to escape. He soon discovered this was not necessary. The smoking lasted four days and the resulting smoke shrouds were then displayed in the same building.

2nd ROOKING I (1:1) A.W.

Antwerp, Belgium 1988

This project took place in the Antwerp city-center, in a residential area. The smoking was part of the 'Summer of Photography' festival. The building had previously been a herring smokery. The building has subsequently been converted into condominiums which are currently all lived-in.

Sawdust was purchased from a sawdust-supply company in an area of Belgium known for its food-smoking and transported to the building where it was piled outside. The sawdust was then taken by wheelbarrow to the interior. Scaffolding was built in order to be able to seal the windows, roof and chimneys with fabric. The smoking lasted for a week and the resulting smoke shrouds were displayed in situ.



